[54] **INTERNET-BASED CUSTOMER REFERRAL SYSTEM**

[75] Inventors: **Jeffrey P. Bezos; Sheldon J. Kaphan; Ellen L. Ratajak; Thomas K. Schonhoff**, all of Seattle, Wash.

[73] Assignee: **Amazon.com, Inc.**, Seattle, Wash.

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Primary Examiner—Emanuel Todd Voeltz
Assistant Examiner—Alexander Kalinowski
Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Knobbe, Martens Olson & Bear, LLP

[57] **ABSTRACT**

Disclosed is an Internet-based referral system that enables individuals and other business entities ("associates") to market products, in return for a commission, that are sold from a merchant's Web site. The system includes automated registration software that runs on the merchant's Web site to allow entities to register as associates. Following registration, the associate sets up a Web site (or other information dissemination system) to distribute hypertextual catalog documents that includes marketing information (product reviews, recommendations, etc.) about selected products of the merchant. In association with each such product, the catalog document includes a hypertextual "referral link" that allows a user ("customer") to link to the merchant's site and purchase the product. When a customer selects a referral link, the customer's computer transmits unique IDs of the selected product and of the associate to the merchant's site, allowing the merchant to identify the product and the referring associate. If the customer subsequently purchases the product from the merchant's site, a commission is automatically credited to an account of the referring associate. The merchant site also implements an electronic shopping cart that allows the customer to select products from multiple different Web sites, and then perform a single "check out" from the merchant's site.

42 Claims, 14 Drawing Sheets